

**PETER SINGER'S UTILITARIANISM IN ANIMAL ETHICS
EDUCATION**

Anna Arnaudova-Otoubirova

Summary: Given the increasing significance of animal ethics and animal welfare education, the following article discusses Peter Singer's utilitarianism as applied to nonhuman animals. Taking into consideration some of its most significant concepts as a moral philosophy theory, it makes an attempt at analysing its major principles and providing a concise outline of some of its most widely discussed strengths and weaknesses within the framework of animal ethics education.

Key words: animal ethics education, utilitarianism, nonhuman animals

Introduction

Ever since the 1970s there has been an increase in people's interest in and concern about nonhuman animals, triggered by a continuous debate that stands in stark contrast to pre-existing traditional Western views of animals seen as non-autonomous resources and machines (Honderich, 1995, pp. 35-36). As a result, animal ethics as a new sub-field of practical ethics has developed. Nowadays, there is a growing number of undergraduate courses in animal ethics, as well as in animal welfare, which have been predominantly designed for the education and training of veterinary and animal-science students (Hazel *et al.*, 2011, p. 74; Hewson *et al.*, 2005). The multidimensional concept of "animal welfare" itself has become a key for reaching the United Nations sustainable development goals and a "shared responsibility and an ethical obligation" for us as human beings (De Briyne *et al.*, 2020, p. 2). Thus, the increasing societal concern for animal welfare issues has resulted not only in the creation of academic courses and programmes for professional development, but also in the development of open-access online courses, such as the 'Animal behaviour and welfare' MOOC (<https://www.coursera.org/learn/animal-welfare>). The course has been developed by the University of Edinburgh's Jeanne Marchig International Centre for Animal Welfare Education in partnership with animal welfare researchers at Scotland's Rural College and has been freely open to those interested in learning about animal welfare. The online course, which began in 2014, initially involved more than 33,000 students with 97.9 per cent of them indicating that it was "a valuable use of their time" and 69 per cent agreeing that the acquired information was beneficial for their professional life (MacKay, 2014, p. ii). Along with this evident increase in animal welfare education, it should be noted that such kind of education normally requires the study of animal welfare science, ethics, law or/and animal behaviour. Hence,

animal ethics becomes an integrative component in the professional training of students in veterinary and animal science programmes of study. On the one hand, it provides that “basic understanding...essential for making decisions about animal care and use” (Shively, 2016, p. 166) and on the other hand, it is “a determination of how humans should treat animals” in light of “an ethical analysis of the concerns of the interested parties” (Main *et al.*, 2005, p. 505).

Furthermore, animal ethics education can be discussed in the context of environmental ethics as a meaningful way for providing cognitive opportunities to foster ethical awareness in a range of issues related to environmental science and environmental education. Junges (2016) argues that all environmental knowledge has ethical implications and that in order to be able to “relearn how to understand nature as our common home” we need “a change in attitude that has to do with ethics” (Junges, 2016, p. 128). Yet, despite the substantial growth of environmental ethics at undergraduate and graduate level (Palmer, 2004, p. 151) many courses concerning the natural environment pay inadequate attention to environmental ethics (Mason, 2004, p. 394). It can be argued that ethics should become an essential element of any environmental science or education programme (Palmer, 2004, p. 151) in order to “enable people to recognise and understand the sources of their own values” and to equip them with sufficient ethical knowledge to “be able to justify the reasoning behind their own conclusions” (Mason, 2004, p. 395).

Last but not least, a course in animal ethics might have a significant impact on learners’ attitudes and their attitudes towards animals in particular. Consequently, research findings indicate that the development of empathy towards animals may relate to the ability to empathize with humans (Hazel *et al.*, 2011, p. 74).

Considering the above, animal ethics holds a strong potential in stressing the intrinsic value of nonhuman animals as part of a biotic community of organisms on our planet and as an integral part of welfare education and environmental science education.

It can be clearly stated that our current understanding of nonhuman animals, as well as people’s relationship with them, has been influenced by various moral philosophical theories. None of these theories, however, can be considered to be the only discourse applicable to animal ethics (Linzey and Linzey, 2018, p. 15). Yet, many will probably agree that Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation* (1975) remains one of the most influential books that have shaped people’s beliefs concerning the moral standing of nonhuman animals and have irrevocably paved the way for the animal liberation movement. Its significance within the field of animal ethics requires a careful analysis of its underlying principles discussed from the perspectives of their moral philosophical benefits and concerns.

Peter Singer’s utilitarianism as applied to nonhuman animals

Utilitarianism as an ethical theory was initially developed by Jeremy

Bentham /1748-1832/, one of the few of his time to assume that the principle of equal consideration of interests may be applicable to nonhuman animals (Singer, 1993, p. 56; Singer, 2002, pp. 6-7). Bentham believed that the rightness of our actions should be guided by the principle of utility and that accordingly we should act in such a way as to minimise pain and to maximise pleasure (Bentham, 1789/1962, cited in McCulloch, 2017, p. 517). In following Bentham's, and subsequently J.S. Mill's, utilitarian footsteps Peter Singer expands our moral concern to members of species other than our own. Opposing speciesism, he argues that 'the only acceptable limit to our moral concern is the point at which there is no awareness of pain or pleasure, no conscious preference, and hence no capacity to experience suffering or happiness' (Singer, 1990, p. 12). For him sentience (the ability to suffer and/or experience enjoyment) is a sufficient condition to accept that animals have interests and that those interests should be considered as equal to our own (Singer, 2002, pp. 8-9; Matheny, 2006, p. 17). Yet, Singer infers that by applying the principle of equal consideration of interests we are not necessarily required to treat individuals equally (Singer, 1993, p. 23; Singer, 2002, p. 2). The right treatment, or the right act to be performed, will depend upon the principle of utility. Thus, the rightness of an act will be determined by the most beneficial outcome - the one that will maximise the overall satisfaction of everyone involved, which is pleasure or happiness in accordance with hedonistic utilitarianism. In the case of Singer, who considers himself a preference utilitarian, the right act will be the one that will bring about what is preferred regardless of whether this will produce satisfaction in the individual with that preference (Singer, 1987, p. 9).

Some strengths of Singer's utilitarianism

According to Linzey and Linzey (2018, pp. 5-14) animal ethics theories share some distinctive commonalities in the principles they reject and embrace. They deny anthropocentrism (the belief that human interests have absolute priority), instrumentalism (the belief that animals exist for satisfying human wants) and reductionism, which avoids moral consideration of animals by placing them in other discourses. The authors proceed further by arguing that animal ethics view animals as having worth in themselves and as deserving respect; that moral consideration of animals is grounded in sentience; that causing animals harm is morally wrong and that there must be profound limits to what humans can do to animals. These progressive ideas are compatible with Singer's utilitarianism as described in his notable books *Animal Liberation* (1975, 1990, 2002) and *Practical Ethics* (1980, 1993, 2011).

Just like other philosophical theories (e.g. deontological and virtue theories) utilitarianism has normative relevance since it is concerned with what our morally appropriate behavior should be with regard to others and how it should be regulated (Aaltola, 2012, pp. 97-100; Fieser, n.d.). As a consequentialist theory it explicitly postulates that our actions should be guided

by the consequences which these actions lead to. Thus, it can be argued that Singer's utilitarianism is action-guiding in applying its principle of equal consideration of interests and favouring the outcome which maximises utility, or 'the balance of benefits over harms' (DeGrazia, 2002, p. 21).

Singer clearly opposes speciesism rejecting the belief that only human life is sacrosanct and claiming that if we are 'to avoid speciesism we must allow that beings who are similar in all relevant respects have a similar right to life and mere membership in our own biological species cannot be a morally relevant criterion for this right' (Singer, 2002, p. 19).

In addition, as a moral equality theory, Singer's utilitarianism requires that the interests of nonhuman animals be considered on equal grounds with the similar interests of human beings and he directly opposes speciesism as he opposes racism (Singer, 1987, p. 4; Singer, 1990, p. 10; Singer, 1993, pp. 57-58; Singer, 2002, p. 19, p. 213). Unlike indirect theories which deny moral status to animals and may recognise certain duties to them (such as not harming them) but only as long as they relate to our moral concern for human beings (DeGrazia, 2002, p. 17 and Wilson, n.d.), Singer's utilitarianism prescribes direct moral duties towards animals (such as not causing them to suffer). The capacity for suffering and enjoyment, according to Singer means that an animal has, at least, an interest in not suffering (Singer, 2002, p. 8), and because pain and suffering are bad, it is our duty to prevent them 'irrespective of race, sex or species of the being that suffers' (Singer, 2002, p. 17). It is because of this close interrelatedness between equal consideration and justice that even Tom Regan, a critic of Singer's utilitarianism, admits that 'the great appeal of utilitarianism rests with its uncompromising egalitarianism' (Regan, 1985). Moreover, by taking into account the interests of everyone affected by an action, utilitarianism can be considered universalist (Matheny, 2006, p. 14), which constitutes another of its advantages.

Singer's two convincing arguments - the argument from marginal cases (Singer, 1993, p. 60) and the sophisticated inegalitarian argument (Singer, 1993, pp. 20-22), successfully defend the moral status of nonhuman animals by rejecting autonomy, rationality and hierarchy of intelligence in humans as a form of discrimination and focusing on sentience instead as a sufficient prerequisite. He argues that if we are to treat animals and humans unequally then we should consider the same unequal treatment of some humans, such as the intellectually disabled (Singer, 1990, pp. 9-10; Singer, 2002, p. 16, pp. 239-240).

Finally, as a value-based theory, utilitarianism is protective of the interests of animals as experiencing beings without necessarily being grounded in rights (Singer, 1987), a concept some people may find too demanding and radical.

Notwithstanding the above, discussions of Singer inevitably lead to arguments either supporting or opposing his theory, the latter being, perhaps, most evident in Tom Regan's publications.

Criticism of Singer's utilitarianism

Tom Regan /1938-2017/, an animal rights advocate and moral philosopher, argues that utilitarians fail to acknowledge the inherent value of individuals and focus instead on the individual's interests as having positive or negative value. Regan accuses Singer of viewing individuals as 'mere receptacles' and criticises the aggregative nature of utilitarianism in adding up individuals' satisfactions and frustration. The first, he believes, allows us to treat individuals as resources having no value in themselves, whereas the latter permits the justification of good results by the use of evil means (Regan, 1985). In defence of his theory, Singer claims that while agreeing with Regan's idea of subjects-of-a-life having inherent value (Singer 1987, 6), he nonetheless persists that Regan is wrong in his accusations and that at least preference utilitarians 'will attribute value to the continued existence of all those beings whom Regan calls subjects-of-a-life' (Singer, 1987, p. 10).

A seemingly weak point in Singer's utilitarianism is his replaceability argument, which Singer himself admits to have been widely criticised (Singer, 1993, p. 122). According to this argument the killing of beings who are not self-conscious and who have no preference in continuing their life can be justified (Singer, 1993, p. 125). The overall good will diminish, especially if the beings have had a life worth living, but can be compensated by bringing into existence other beings that will similarly have a good life. This, in Singer's view, may explain the killing of animals raised for food when they are treated humanely and killed painlessly but is no excuse for factory farming where nonhuman animals experience great suffering (Singer, 1993, p. 12; Singer, 2002, pp. 95-158). Even though such an argument may sound plausible, it does not take into account the value of individual animals and allows their lives to be sacrificed by concentrating on 'abstract moral equations' (Aaltola, 2012, p. 112).

It can be argued that Singer's utilitarianism remains somewhat flexible as to what the right act should be with respect to the use of nonhuman animals for food, experimentations or entertainment. Generally, he condemns all forms of animal use which cause suffering with little or no benefit for humans (Singer, 2002). In accordance with the utility principle, however, having considered the overall satisfaction of preferences and the value of individual lives, especially of self-aware beings, he believes that the right moral conduct may vary (Singer, 2002, pp. 20-21; Francione 2010, p. 30). In my opinion, the above could be both beneficial and depriving when the fate of sentient nonhuman animals is at stake. It obviously takes into account individual suffering but may still allow some animals to suffer for the greater good of the majority.

In addition, Singer's utilitarianism can be further discussed in the context of its impact on other animal ethic theories (animal rights theory, virtue theory, feminist theories on animal rights, etc.). Even though such discussions have aroused a long-lasting debate, they do not fall within the scope of the current theoretical analysis and with respect to their inclusion in animal ethic courses would be considered appropriate for more advanced learners of graduate level.

Conclusion

All things considered, Singer's utilitarianism as applied to nonhuman animals is an influential but controversial theory. By applying moral status to animals and defending the principle of equal consideration of interests Singer convincingly argues that other-than-human sentient beings at least have an interest in avoiding pain and suffering and that it is therefore our duty to stop harming and killing them. Sometimes, nonhuman interests may be overridden by those of humans because of the value attributed to the life of normal humans. Yet, from an utilitarian perspective all interests should be taken into account and only by adding up the preferences of all individuals affected on a case by case basis can we estimate the consequence of an action and decide on the most morally appropriate moral conduct. Undoubtedly, Singer's utilitarianism has its recognised strengths and some criticised weaknesses and will likely remain open to further discussions and interpretations in the future. It has laid a solid foundation for the development of animal ethic theories and given the increasing significance of animal welfare issues and of animal ethics in particular deserves its proper place on the educational agenda.

References

- Aaltola**, E. (2012). Morality and non-human suffering: analytical animal ethics. In: Aaltola, E. *Animal Suffering: Philosophy and Culture*, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 97–145.
- De Briyne**, N., Vidović, J., Morton, D. B., & Magalhães-Sant'Ana, M. (2020). Evolution of the Teaching of Animal Welfare Science, Ethics and Law in European Veterinary Schools (2012–2019). *Animals*, 10(7), 1–13.
- DeGrazia**, D. (2002). *Animal Rights: A very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Fieser**, J. Undated. Ethics. In: *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: A Peer-reviewed Academic Resource* [online]. [viewed 2 April 2022]. Available from: <https://www.iep.utm.edu/anim-eth/>
- Francione**, G.L. (2010). Animal welfare and the moral value of nonhuman animals. *Law, Culture and the Humanities*, 6(1), 1–13.
- Hazel**, S. J., Signal, T. D., & Taylor, N. (2011). Can Teaching Veterinary and Animal-Science Students about Animal Welfare Affect Their Attitude toward Animals and Human-Related Empathy? *Journal of Veterinary Medical Education*, 38(1), 74–83.
- Hewson**, C. J., Baranyiová, E., Broom, D. M., Cockram, M. S., Galindo, F., Hanlon, A. J., Waldau, P. (2005). Approaches to Teaching Animal Welfare at 13 Veterinary Schools Worldwide. *Journal of Veterinary Medical Education*, 32(4), 422–437.
- Honderich**, T. (ed.) (1995). *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Junges**, J. R. (2016). What is the future of ethics teaching in the environmental

- sciences. *International Journal of Ethics Education*, 1(2), 127–135.
- Linzey**, A. and Linzey, C. (2018). Introduction: the challenge of animal ethics. In: Linzey, A. and Linzey, C. (eds.) *The Palgrave Handbook of Practical Animal Ethics*. Oxford: Palgrave Macmillan, 1–22.
- MacKay**, J., Langford, F., & Waran, N. (2014). Animal welfare education - can MOOCs contribute? *Veterinary Record*, 17 (15) 5, i–ii
- Main**, D. C. J., Thornton, P., & Kerr, K. (2005). Teaching Animal Welfare Science, Ethics, and Law to Veterinary Students in the United Kingdom. *Journal of Veterinary Medical Education*, 32(4), 505–508.
- Mason**, H. (2004). Teaching Environmental Ethics to Non-specialist Students. *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology*, 8(2), 394–400.
- Matheny**, G. (2006). Utilitarianism and animals, In: Singer, P. (ed.) *In Defense of Animals: The Second Wave*. Cornwall: Blackwell Publishing, 13–25.
- McCulloch**, S. and Michael, J. R. (2017). Bovine tuberculosis and badger culling in England: a utilitarian analysis of policy options. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 30, 511–533.
- Palmer**, C. (2004). Introduction to Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion Special Edition on Teaching Environmental Ethics. *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology*, 8(2), 151–161.
- Regan**, T. (1985). The case for animal rights. In: Singer, P. (ed.) *In Defense of Animals*, New York: Basil Blackwell, 13-26 [online]. [viewed 12 April 2022]. Available from: <http://www.animal-rights-library.com/texts-m/regan03.htm>
- Shivley**, C. B., Garry, F. B., Kogan, L. R., & Grandin, T. (2016). Survey of animal welfare, animal behavior, and animal ethics courses in the curricula of AVMA Council on Education-accredited veterinary colleges and schools. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, 248 (10), 1165–1170.
- Singer**, P. (2002). *Animal Liberation*, 3rd Edn. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Singer**, P. (1990). The significance of animal suffering. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*. 13 (1), 9–12.
- Singer**, P. (1993). *Practical Ethics*. 2nd Edn. Cambridge University Press.
- Singer**, P. (1987). Animal liberation or animal rights? *The Monist*, 70(1), 3–14.
- Wilson**, S.D. Undated. Animals and ethics. In: *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: A Peer-reviewed Academic Resource*. [online]. [viewed 2 April 2022]. Available from: <https://www.iep.utm.edu/anim-eth/>

Author Info:

Assist. Prof. **Anna Arnaudova-Otouzbirova**, PhD
 Faculty of Education, Trakia University,
 Stara Zagora, Bulgaria
 e-mail: anna.arnaudova@trakia-uni.bg